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Book Review 5: Kingwell, Mark. *The Ethics of Architecture* New York: Oxford University Press, 2021

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"In the view of many thinkers," notes Mark Kingwell, "true thinking is only possible while walking."[1] In step with this observation, his own thoughts present a series of perambulations and deviations along the sometimes poorly-lit paths of architecture's ethical commitments.

The Ethics of Architecture does not pretend to offer an exhaustive survey of its territory. Nor does it aim to compete with the scope of Karsten Harries's *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, published in 1997 and still robust today. Instead, Kingwell's narrative is personal, as every good guide must be. He describes neighbourhoods in his hometown Toronto, altercations with security guards at the Empire State Building, and experiences among migrant construction workers in Qatar. But his excursions are also set against a broader landscape of ideas, populated by its own engaging cast of characters. Heidegger appears repeatedly, in the company of philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to John Rawls and Charles Taylor. And there are other, less strictly philosophical, protagonists, from Louis Sullivan and Adolf Loos to Robert Moses, General Eisenhower, and Homer Simpson. These interlocutors render the conversation accessible to every reader.

Kingwell opens by framing architecture's ethical obligations within the context of the shifting crises of our century: poverty and plague; the expansion of homelessness and the shrinking of public space; swelling populations, growing isolation, and rising sea levels, exacerbated by the anxieties of modernity and the fault lines of social unrest, political bombast, despair, suspicion, and surveillance. Any reader who has pondered these troubles will find the book rewarding. Published during a year of pandemic, it aspires to take advantage of a "pause in the reckless velocities of neoliberal life," urging a longer perspective.[2]

The book is a slim volume, easy to take with you as you step into the streets of the contemporary city. Yet it draws on the intellectual depth of a philosopher with a longstanding interest in architecture. And it proves a provocative companion, reminding the reader, right from its opening pages, of what is at stake in building a society. "Shapers of space need to reconceive their task as uncovering the utopian and revolutionary possibilities of building, of opening up spaces for political thought and action." The word *political* must here be read with all the force of its origins in the ancient *polis*.[3] But to build, notes Kingwell, is also to believe. The discipline of architecture, thoughtfully pursued, demands belief in something worth building for. But what to believe in? Contemporary culture offers binaries of precarity and privilege—undergirded by individualist ideologies that match the vacuous project of personal self-fulfilment with the reduction of individuals "to clusters of spending patterns or retail choices."[4] None of this is satisfying.

Kingwell reminds us that "the kind of urban world we build for ourselves today will determine whether we have the civic vocabulary to be more than just a society of consumers."[5] And he poses provocative questions—among them, the one that is precedent to all architectural thought: "Are buildings necessarily sites, as Heidegger suggested, of fundamental existential reflection?" Kingwell's book would argue in the affirmative. But specific architectural answers are more elusive. The author is himself a philosopher, and he notes that ethical reflections, "by their nature, are always themselves *preliminary to action*."[6] To translate abstract concept into material reality is a task for architect, patron, and public. For such readers, Kingwell's text serves as an invitation.

The book could occasionally have benefitted from more careful editing. The reader stumbles over sporadic errors and omissions. A pedestal is mistaken for a pediment; sentences are repeated; a line of text is formatted as a subtitle. And there are unhappy moments, like one describing the Nazi party's 1937 "Degenerate Art" exhibition as "a monument of aesthetic courage"[7]—when precisely the opposite was surely meant. These slips reflect poorly on the velocity of contemporary academic publishing.

More vexing, however, is a recurring refrain that is quick to associate "neoclassical nonsense" *tout court* with figures from Adolf Hitler to Donald Trump, pitting New York City's "deliberately anti-classical" Museum of Modern Art as a "welcoming" democratic rebuke to the "intimidating" authoritarian façade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[8] In 2022, that caricature sounds oddly discordant, in a way that is not fully defused by the author's admission that MoMA's architecture was itself designed "by, ironically, Nazi-admiring Philip Johnson."

To be fair, the author is conscious that neoclassicism can hardly claim a monopoly on despotism. He acknowledges the lingering reality of other entanglements with repressive regimes, in a narrative that features the names of a cadre of architects who have attained the highest ranks of professional and academic success: I. M. Pei, Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid, and Bjarke Ingels. He does not pretend to resolve the uncomfortable disciplinary implications of these associations. But part of the book was evidently written during the brief interval between the publication of President Trump's ill-conceived executive order promoting the adoption of classical and traditional architectures for federal buildings, and its revocation by President Biden a few weeks later. It may be noted that Biden was photographed signing the revocation while seated at a desk placed carefully in front of the base profile of a neoclassical pilaster order, just one month after the celebration of his own inauguration, when the full glory of the neoclassical architecture of the US Capitol was mobilized in favour of a peaceful transfer of power, and two months after the chaos of January 6, when that same neoclassical architecture was attacked by Trump's supporters.

The US Capitol is not on my list of favourite architectures; and yet this structure—a symbol for longer commitments that retain their significance only if protected from abuse—offers a metaphor both for the present political moment and for architects' ethical obligations. What was celebrated during Biden's inauguration as the "temple of our democracy" and as a "shrine and citadel to liberty" was attacked soon after with axes, bats, and crowbars. Celebrated and attacked, the architecture stands in the background of both narratives, offering a shared point of reference, an opportunity either to address the ruptures of contemporary public discourse or to inflame their sound-bite narratives. Kingwell's *Ethics of Architecture* brings this opportunity to the foreground.

Happily, the book points toward a deeper engagement with architecture's longer obligations. "Architecture is not just the ordering and manipulation of space, but also of time," notes Kingwell.[9] Architecture's ethical obligation to *time* extends beyond that of a four-year term. It places us not only within the short-term context of our own individual mortality—ashes to ashes, dust to dust—but also within a longer trajectory of shared human endeavour. This responsibility both to future and to past has not always been acknowledged with equal enthusiasm; the architecture of the last century, in particular, is rightly condemned for the desperate short-sightedness of its outlook.

Indeed, Kingwell's various excursions leave room for the reader to explore the spaces between, and there are opportunities to place one passage in conversation with another. For instance, in his introduction the author quotes an increasingly tired critique, ca. 2014, of Britain's Prince Charles, now King Charles III.[10] Without wading into the shallows of that swamp, I am inclined to think that future decades will come to reassess its false dichotomies, just as many of Prince Charles's onetime axioms have quietly been adopted, more recently, by the most progressive of thinkers. Again, Kingwell's own text points the way forward, proposing the notion of a tradition as a way to plot a viable connection between democracy

and justice.[11] Quoting G. K. Chesterton, he adds: "tradition is only democracy extended through time. It is trusting to a consensus of common human voices."[12] But he also notes "the evidence of traditions in practice, their tendencies to ossify, corrupt, and even oppress, not just on the basis of bare power or deception but *in the name of tradition itself*."

There is work still to be done to resolve this tension. And Kingwell does not fully extend this line of thought to trace its implications for building culture more generally—although it is worth paying attention to a growing recognition of the significance of vital *traditions* of building that stand outside the wretchedness of standard North American building practice (*pace* Alasdair MacIntyre, whose definition of a genuine *practice* is relevant here). However, Kingwell does go on to discuss the significance of architecture's relationship to *time*. He is conscious of the poverty of a "relentless demand for speedy novelty,"[13] that combines with an equally constant nostalgia "the ideology of inevitability that creeps up around technology—an ideology so stealthy and complete, and so intimately related to the very idea of capital, that it is functionally invisible."[14] He himself provides a terrific introduction to the distinction between two (Greek) conceptions of time: *chronos* and *kairos*. One, regulated by chronometers of increasing precision, responds to "the proposition that time is money," a commodity to be measured, parcelled out, sold, consumed.[15] The other, resistant to transactional reduction, answers to altogether different laws, the laws of the holi-day. Architecture's ethical discourse must answer to both of these. And it must be framed not only within the painfully narrow window of the present—no doubt a portrait window, too often conceived as a selfie—but also within the longer narrative frieze that extends from the future into the past, within which our own lives amble slowly backward.

At the end of his book Kingwell returns to a question posed to architects at the beginning: "Who do you work for?" He is conscious that architecture cannot be—even if it often is—an inward-facing discipline. As the most public form of art, constituting nothing less than a form of social trust, it has larger ethical responsibilities. Even a failure to communicate—what Kingwell describes as "the bafflegab of architectural theory"[16]—has ethical implications. Appropriately, Kingwell ends with a clearly articulated response. "Who do you work for? You work for *everyone*, human or otherwise."[17]

To work for *everyone*, of course, risks working for no one in particular—or, perhaps, working for yourself, for your own interests, for your own professional advancement. And here we might recall Oliver O'Donovan's 1989 essay "The Loss of a Sense of Place," where the ethicist writes: "The universal claim of every human being upon every other is, after all, more of a critical principle than a substantial one. To love everybody in the world equally is in fact to love nobody very much."[18] This, then, is the challenge for architects and for all those who wander the streets of our communal lives: to populate Kingwell's questions with specific and substantive answers.

Notes

1 Mark Kingwell, *The Ethics of Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 47.

2 Ibid., xx.

3 Ibid., 21.

4 Ibid., 24.

5 Ibid., 19.

6 Ibid., 50.

7 Ibid., 75.

8 Ibid., 76.

9 Ibid., 84.

10 Ibid., 4–7.

11 Ibid., 91.

12 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1945; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 53, quoted in Kingwell, *Ethics of Architecture*, 92.

13 Kingwell, *Ethics of Architecture*, 23.

14 Ibid., 32.

15 Ibid., 98.

16 Ibid., 72.

17 Ibid., 125.

18 Oliver O'Donovan, "The Loss of a Sense of Place," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (1989): 53–54.

About the Author

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